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# THE NEED FOR CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

*By* WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.

A DAZZLING rich acquaintance of mine summoned together his landscape gardeners fifteen years ago and gave them detailed instructions on how to conceal his swimming pool from public view. For landscapers with a great deal of experience, there wasn't much to it. Reroute the driveway, transplant some spruces and oaks, plant high hedges, and instruct the gardeners to let them grow wild so as not to call attention to them, or to what they hid. It was a three-week's job, that's all, and the owner has since contented himself that no casual passerby will ever be aware that twenty yards from the road there lies a capacious, 100,000 gallon swimming pool.

My acquaintance is socially conscious. He is aware that the average citizen, on spotting the opulent pool, would ruminate on the disparities between his own income and that of the pool owner. And having pondered such inequalities, the flames of his resentment against the rich would be fanned, and he would urge on his political representatives redoubled zeal toward leveling incomes so as to put an end to such social effronteries as swimming pools.

In hiding his pool, however, my wealthy acquaintance made a dangerous philosophic concession — that private property is itself a social evil. To be sure, he chose the line of least resistance. And, pragmatically, he calculated that concealing his pool was a way of retaining it forever, because somebody once told him that what the people don't know won't hurt them. (Though the fact remains that despite his fastidious conservatism, and that of most of his contemporary comrades in wealth, the leveling process continues unabated.)

It just may be, all things considered, that an alternative policy would have done more social good. Maybe, in the interest of private property as a principle, he should have shored up his pool on 15-foot high pedestals, and chained to each corner a vicious Great Dane who, for frightening away the proletariat, would be rewarded three times a day with filet mignon, medium, well-done or, at any rate, *à son gout.*

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SOMETIME, say between 1900 and 1920, the notion got around in this country that the ownership of wealth is evil. And sometime in the ensuing 20 years, the notion that society could and should do something about this evil outpaced the competing philosophy that property is private. Egalitarianism took over and passed a lot of laws. And in its head-on rush, the leveling movement trampled unfeelingly on those nice distinctions and important considerations that a mature society should dwell upon before jettisoning a social adjustment based on so many years of experience and tradition.

The levelers failed to distinguish, for example, between wealth accumulated by production and wealth acquired by various forms of highwaymanry. Thus, the income tax rate-scale sent to Mr. Charles Wilson is in all respects identical with the one sent to Mr. Frank Costello or Mr. Harry Truman. The levelers also failed to reckon with the by-products of wealth; thus the present-day scarcity of risk capital, and the predictable inertia of so many individuals when they decide between careers of security and adventure. Most important, of course, the levelers neglected to ponder the indefeasible relationship between private property and freedom. They bleated about human rights taking precedence over property rights, when, in fact, the right of ownership is the index of human rights.

Mr. Thorsten Veblen's outraged outpourings against conspicuous consumption have, unfortunately, accomplished a great deal more than simply to decrease conspicuous consumption. They have reframed public attitudes and public policy in such a way as to make exhibitions of wealth not inappropriate, or callous, or morally deplorable, but, to an increasing extent, *practically* impossible.

Thus, in the early twenties, Cole Porter threw a clambake in Venice towards the illumination of which he provided 100,000 candles. Inexcusable, was the general reaction, but then there's nothing much to be done about it. Two years ago, a Mexican tycoon sponsored a similar extravaganza in Venice. Betty Hutton came dressed as Mozart. The cost ($5,000) of her costume, one sociologically-minded national magazine commented, would have been enough to solve Mozart's life-long financial problems. Society was generally appalled, and from various quarters there were mutterings about how it shouldn't be permitted. *"If he lived in England"*, one journalist commented acidly, *"he just couldn't have done such a thing. And if he lived in America, he'd have had to break into his capital."*

Exactly right. The point is not that Cole Porter would probably not *choose* to affront society by a similar display in 1952; the point is that he could probably not afford to, because the levelers haven't left him the wherewithal for such festiveness. In short, the dis-

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tinction between social and legal sanctions, so important to the libertarian, has become completely blurred.

And more than the liberty of Mr. Porter has been jeopardized on the altar of equality, of course; society has neglected to consider the stakes of its ill-devised expropriation. After all, that Cole Porter should burn 100,000 candles is not important. It is, though, presumably important that he should continue to be enticed to write music. Of this we can be sure, if only because the marketplace has given the most tangible evidence that there is a throbbing demand for his compositions. Else he could never have accumulated the money with which to buy all those candles.

YET HERE WE SIT, concealing our swimming pools, while the massive snowball of the levelers continues to deprive property of meaning. The assault against property is no longer devious or tangential. All over the country, in the ivied classrooms of learning, the social scientists are insisting, in words of one syllable, that private property is in no manner of speaking a "right", nor is it in any way related to freedom. They go so far as to say that private property has little to do with productivity, that the rewards for production are relative, that in the last analysis man is as satisfied with social recognition as he is with property. To illustrate this, the professors liked to point, for a while, to the Stakhanovite movement in Russia, which rewarded unusual individual industry with medals, public parades and the like. They gave up this illustration about the time Russia was forced to turn to cash rewards for her diligent workers.

The problem is how to revive a respect for and an understanding of private property. We must primarily rely, of course, on the schools to do this. But there are certain other measures that, in our extremity, we might well turn to, for effect. We might resort to a little well-placed, expertly-directed conspicuous consumption.

The precedent of putting a chip on one's shoulder to affirm a point, is time-honored, dramatic and repercussive. For example:

. . . In England, the House of Commons goes through a ritual every year, a few minutes before the King appears in the House of Lords to open the parliamentary session officially. The House passes a token piece of legislation whose only purpose is to inform the King of its independence of him. It is thought, presumably, that a modern monarch might be a poor historian and forget the Lesson of 1688. Thus he is reminded every year.

. . . In the 18th Century, in the British Navy, the executor would carry out a sentence of flogging to the last prescribed lash, even though the culprit might have died half

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way through the ordeal. The purpose was to establish the point that there could be no compromise with justice. Cruel, yes, but meaningful.

. . . Until recently, in Spain and Latin America, a purchaser of a tract of land regularly ordered the seller to remove himself from the land as a part of the ritual establishing the transfer of title.

. . . In Hyde Park, every Sunday, the most outlandish and scurrilous and useless speeches are tolerated in the name of free speech. The untrammeled use of the soapbox is treasured by every Englishman with the remotest concern for freedom.

WHY SHOULDN'T economic liberty — private property — be fortified by occasional, unapologetic exhibitions of the same nature? They would surely be pragmatically tolerable. Their purpose, after all, would be to rejuvenate the doctrine of the meaning of private property. Such a resuscitation would inescapably conduce to maximum general prosperity and individual freedom. One way to do this, of course, is to slam the door in the face of the tax collector, or maybe to slit his throat, as Emerson once threatened to do. But we are law-abiding folk, and we must look for a lawful device. As yet there are no laws against conspicuous consumption; the laws have to do with making such consumption more and more difficult.

We need, then, in these twilight days of private property, a good, melodramatic binge of conspicuous consumption, to reaffirm the privacy of property. I therefore urge those libertarians who can afford it to take some desperate steps, to make some great sacrifices, even if they have to sell their capital to do it.

Let's see a businessman toss a big party and invite the press. He might buy five or six Cadillacs and run them over a cliff for the entertainment of his guests. This should come before their swim in a pool filled with Mums champagne, 1936. After they're cleaned up, let six radio-controlled DC-6's serve as targets for their guests, each of whom will be provided with a 50-calibre machine gun, and 10,000 rounds of tracer ammunition. And for the one who gets most planes, there's the grand prize of one plantation in South Carolina, one newspaper in the middle west, a lifelong subscription to *Gourmet,* and a Botticelli painting.

A few such performances, widely advertised, might be just the thing. It would be very important, of course, to rehearse the host, so that in answer to the spate of questions from the press, asking what had come over him, he would say, without faltering, "Not a thing. What's the matter, didn't you enjoy the party?"

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# HUMAN EVENTS

FRANK C. HANIGHEN, *Editor* FRANK S. MEYER, *Associate Editor*

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**Inaugural:** The President's address drew much praise from the Washington crowds — for its humane spirit, its dignity and its profoundly spiritual note. As we go to press today, observers — diplomats, statesmen, politicians — are studying the text of his speech and reserving final judgment until tomorrow, until more careful and detailed consideration can be given.

The comment will be generally favorable. But we feel duty bound to report one adverse comment widely made here even by some who are close friends of the new Chief Executive.

No sophisticated observer expected that Eisenhower would bluntly express what is obviously in the hearts of the American people about the United Nations. No one anticipated that, at this early date, he would voice the keen popular disappointment, nay real disgust, with the organization which once seemed to offer a solution for peace. Time and preparation would be indicated for such a new step.

But it certainly can be said that there was no mass enthusiasm for his promise to "strive" to still make the UN an "effective force". We believe that if, instead, he had called for the dismantlement of an organization which has become a menace to our national being, the new President would have brought a roar of approval from every state in the country.

**Wilson:** The agony of Mr. Charles Wilson inspires much sympathy among businessmen who personally understand his predicament, but not much among Republican leaders in the Congress. Amid the Inaugural festivities during the past few days, we had the opportunity of talking about the matter with many Republican members of the Legislative branch. Almost without exception, they were exceedingly critical of Mr. Wilson's attitude and summed it all up as "this is a government of laws not of men". Wilson is of undoubted integrity, but a law is a law. And public service demands self-sacrifice by those who enter it. Those were the prevailing sentiments of Senators and Representatives of Mr. Wilson's party.

One example of self-sacrifice frequently cited on Capitol Hill was that of Senator Hugh Butler of Nebraska. In 1940, he was elected to the Senate on the Republican ticket. In the interim period between election and assembling of Congress, Butler took stock of his personal situation in relation to his new status. He was the owner of a prosperous grain concern in Omaha. The firm was then engaged in selling grain to the Government, under the price support system. He decided to place himself in a position in which he could not possibly be subjected to political criticism.

He put his grain business into an irrevocable trust or foundation, the proceeds of which would pay for Agricultural school scholarships. He resigned as an officer of the business and thereafter took no salary. Mr. Butler's sacrifice ran into six figures. But, his colleagues point out, this represented just as much of a sacrifice to this man of moderate wealth as the $2,500,000 GM stock does to Mr. Wilson. It is likely that the Senator (who is a power in the upper chamber) did not find Mr. Wilson's predicament so unique and insoluble as did the auto executive.

**How Ike Won:** A leader of the Republican National Committee at the annual meeting last Saturday made some highly interesting remarks about the lessons of the election. Politicos naturally take a keen interest in the facts and figures relating to the question: how did we win? — because they must also

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face the question: how can we win in 1954 and 1956? What was said during the past week suggests that they have an attitude towards these problems quite different from that of the White House advisers of President Eisenhower. The latter apparently feel that Ike won the election purely because of his personal popularity, and they are evidently planning to maintain his national power by appeasing majority pressure groups along "me-too" lines. The Durkin appointment is considered significant of this attitude.

That isn't the view of leaders in the GOP National Committee which represents the rank and file of the party. Mr. Wayne Hood, Executive Director of the Committee, at last week's meeting revealed that a secret plan guided the management of the Ike campaign. "The major point of campaign strategy", said Hood (as reported in the *New York Times* on January 18), "was the decision to drop the 'me-too' approach that had cost the party dearly in previous campaigns; to pay less attention to the so-called 'independent vote' and to concentrate on the 'stay-at-homes' who had not been at the polls in previous elections. . . . The stay-at-home voters outnumbered the independents by approximately 45,000,000 to an estimated 3,000,000 to 4,000,000." Hood emphasized that an overwhelming majority of the 14,000,000 Ike majority were former "stay-at-homes", the balance being new voters. Of the 14 million — about 3,000,000 voted Democratic, while about 11,000,000 went into the Republican column.

Observers here draw the conclusion (from all these figures) that the election was not a Republican Party victory. Also, since Ike won only 55 per cent of the popular vote, he did not achieve the "landslide" (60 per cent or over) won by Harding, Coolidge and Roosevelt (in '36) which constitutes overwhelming "personal popularity" of a triumphant presidential candidate. They believe it was not an "Ike victory", but a victory over Truman and Trumanism.

Hence the policy of the new regime should be aimed at keeping the same voters (and if possible increasing their number) who were responsible for last November's victory. This involves dropping the cultivation of minority and pressure groups wedded to the left-wing of the Democratic Party and proceeding on the same strategy as the "secret plan" which brought about the November triumph. Apparently there looms a conflict within the Eisenhower ranks on this vital point.

**Roberts:** At the same meeting, the Republican National Committee elected Mr. Wesley Roberts of Kansas as Chairman, to succeed Mr. Arthur Summerfield who has become Postmaster General. It was noticed that staunch supporters of Senator Taft's bid for nomination last spring were in the forefront of those who pushed Roberts' election. Political observers explain this as follows:

Kansans like Roberts who supported Ike did so on the basis that he was a "favorite son". They are in quite a different category than the eastern internationalist backers of Eisenhower (like Governor Sherman Adams of New Hampshire, for example). Kansas took Ike because he was "one of ours", rather than because of the internationalist side of the General's philosophy. The people of Kansas think very much like Senator Taft on foreign issues. Roberts is classified as "typically Kansan" and representative of the people of his state. This is a point to be remembered if and when (which is likely) the conflict between the ideas of the White House advisers and the ideas of the conservative wing of the Party in Congress sharpens. For, then, the National Committee Chairman may be found to be very sympathetic to the Congressional leadership of the Party.

The election of Roberts to the Chairmanship may also have important bearing on the distribution of patronage and may also conflict with those managing patronage in the Executive branch, notably Mr. Brownell, Attorney General. The latter apparently is using his power of patronage to build up the Dewey network throughout the country, slighting anti-Dewey forces in the various states and the majority of the county committeemen who favored Taft. Roberts is known — in his work in the Kansas State Committee — as a politician who defers to the wishes of local political leaders of the party on patronage. If he follows this policy in his new post, he may find himself at sharp variance with Mr. Brownell.

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**The Nebraska Incident:** On Capitol Hill, they are pondering what they call the "Nebraska incident" which occurred in the past week. It involves patronage, but more importantly it involves foreign policy, globaloney and Secretary Dulles, right at the outset of his direction of the State Department.

The White House last week appointed former Governor Val Peterson of Nebraska as Ambassador to India, to succeed New Dealer Chester Bowles. Under the recent patronage accord between congressional leaders and Ike, the appointment was referred to Senators Butler and Griswold of Nebraska. These Senators bluntly and emphatically signified their disapproval of the appointment of Peterson. Why?

Last spring, Peterson (classified as a "liberal" Republican and sympathetic to internationalism) challenged the preponderant political power of Senator Butler in that State, and ran for the Senatorial nomination in opposition to Butler's bid for re-election. Peterson also alienated Griswold who was nominated for the short-term contest for the seat of Senator Wherry of Nebraska then recently deceased. It was well known that Griswold was controlled by Butler. An inter-party fight of great bitterness ensued. It is little wonder that Butler and Griswold effectively vetoed the Federal appointment of their enemy Peterson.

Another factor may have had influence. There has been current a report that retiring Ambassador Bowles last November (under cover of election news) promised the Indian Government $1 billion of U.S. foreign aid to run over the next four years. No *quid pro quo* from the Indian Government (which has not been of help to the U.S. in the Far Eastern situation) was reported. It is speculated that State Department officials, of the Acheson school, wanted the New Deal internationalist Peterson as a pliable ambassador, to carry out this piece of globaloney.

Mr. Dulles did not cut a very good figure. We learn that he sought to persuade the Nebraska senators to drop their resistance to the Peterson appointment. This only added fuel to the fire. It may be a small fire, but it has not increased Dulles' popularity in the Senate.

**Treasury:** Conservative financial circles note with approval that one of the principal Treasury figures in the Truman regime will continue in office under Secretary Humphrey. He is Andrew Overby, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury during the past two years under Secretary Snyder, and reputedly a big influence on Snyder during the past seven years. The reasons why these circles like Overby is because he is believed to have been largely responsible for many sound policies and measures which have borne Snyder's name. Many here think that this Assistant Secretary was responsible for the harmonious cooperation between the Treasury and Mr. William McChesney Martin (Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board) in working out the orderly "unpegging" of the bond market since 1951, the gradual raising of the interest rate and the smooth cooperation between the Board and Mr. Snyder's department in the past two years.

It is a little known fact that Overby has been a severe (but quite anonymous) critic of the Administration's indiscriminate give-away policies in Europe and that much of Snyder's behind-the-scenes resistance to the policies of Marshall, Hoffman and Harriman have been due to him.

**Tax Front:** Two weeks ago we reported the refusal of Mrs. Lucy Sisson, candy shop proprietor of South Middleboro, Mass., to pay the "social security" tax of $15.80 levied against her by the Internal Revenue Bureau. Last week, we reported the case of Mrs. Mary Cain, newspaper publisher of Summit, Miss.; she not only refused to pay the tax, but when the IRB sought to enforce its ruling by padlocking the door of her plant, she defied the authorities by sawing off the padlock. Now comes word of two more such cases.

(1) Howard G. Pennington, a Lincoln Park (Mich.) merchant, refused to pay the $81 compulsory "social security" tax on the ground that he does not want the "insurance"; the IRB clamped a lien on him, and he is reported ready to go to court.

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(2) Auctioneer John F. Andrews, Beach City, Ohio, submitted to the confiscation of $84.94 (by a levy on his bank account), and is now spending much more than that amount to tell his fellow-citizens, in a well-reasoned broadsheet, why he refused to pay the tax.

Rebellion always starts with isolated cases. If our ears do not deceive us, they all add up to the rumbling of revolt.

**Books and Magazines:** A sensational book event — not yet announced — will be the appearance of a new volume from the pen of Mr. John T. Flynn, author of *The Road Ahead* and *While They Slept*. The title of the book will be *The Lattimore Story*, and its publication will take place in March. ($1 per copy. Devin-Adair Co., 23 East 26th St., N. Y.) Professor Lattimore has been indicted for perjury and it is expected that his trial will start before spring. Lattimore was named by Senator McCarthy as the "architect" of our disastrous policy in the Far East, and "L'Affaire Lattimore" has made history in the past two years.

One of the interesting shifts in the magazine world of the past week is the fact that Mr. William Johnson, editor of the monthly, *Faith and Freedom* (published by Spiritual Mobilization in Los Angeles), has become Managing Editor of our esteemed contemporary, *The Freeman* (fortnightly), under Mr. Henry Hazlitt, as Editor. The new team of Hazlitt and Johnson takes over the editorial direction of *The Freeman* as editors John Chamberlain, Forrest Davis and Suzanne LaFollette resigned early this week. Mr. Johnson, a young man and rising star in the conservative publication world, is regarded as having done an excellent job on *Faith and Freedom*.

The Guardians of American Education, Inc., 225 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y., offers reprints of a penetrating article, "Our Academic Hucksters", which originally appeared in the *American Legion Magazine*. The author is E. Merrill Root, Professor of English at Earlham College, who contributed to HUMAN EVENTS the popular piece, "Darkness at Noon in American Colleges".

**"Anti-Intellectualism":** Recently the running educational battle royal flared up again at a meeting of the American Historical Association, in Washington. Prof. Arthur E. Bestor, Jr., of the University of Illinois, introduced a sixteen-page resolution, signed by more than 500 educators, which called for the creation of a Permanent Scientific and Scholarly Commission on Secondary Education to return "the great intellectual disciplines" fully to the high school curriculum. This was but another challenge to the "life adjustment" movement which has all but engulfed our educational circles — the idea that vocational training is more important than intellectual disciplines to high school students, because most of them do not go to college and ought not to be burdened with these disciplines. Prof. Bestor characterized this movement as "deterioration of our secondary school education".

The resolution — which was neatly referred to a committee for future study — also touched on the ticklish subject of teacher training; it deplored the emphasis on pedagogical methods rather than on competence in the subject taught. That is to say, it was a frontal attack on "progressive" education.

The side-tracking of the resolution emphasizes the dominant position of the organized "progressive" or "life adjustment" educators. But, it incidentally furnished the opposition, as was evident in the newspaper reports of the meeting, with a weapon that will grow more powerful with use: the word "anti-intellectualism". Nothing will undermine the sangfroid of the utilitarians, of teachers who put carpentering or domestic science on a par with literature and superior to Latin, than to dub them "anti-intellectuals" — which they are.

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